UNDERSTANDING A TRADITION: ANALYZIS OF THE CHARRO ATTIRE AS A WORK OF ART

Arturo Bugarín Correa

University of Northern Colorado
Greeley, Colorado
School of Visual and Performing Arts

Honors Advisors
Michael A. Coronel, Dr. Robert Weis, Loree Crow

Abstract

This thesis examines the development, creation and characteristics of the charro suit as a work of art, and its use as a social and class distinguisher in Mexico since the seventeen-century. Focusing on aesthetics, who uses it and when, its history, what influences affect it and the production of the suit was analyzed in order to gain a better understanding of how the suit developed and evolved into the current design used. Particular attention was given to one of the most distinguishable components of the suit, which are the fretted patterns, known as grecas. This was analyzed by separating the individual design aspects that create it and then trying to locate, if possible, their origin in indigenous, colonial and foreign designs.

A glance at the history of the attire presents a social equalization between hacendados and peónes brought by changing laws and customs, most specifically the 1633 royal decree reinforcing King Felipe II's 1568 and 1570 decrees prohibiting natives to ride horses, and the widespread use of the same by the seventeenth century. Then explored how those legal prohibitions led to the use of a visual identifier, the charro suit, to distinguish between hacendados and peónes and how this suit evolved.

This has brought a new perspective to a cultural icon, and the visual, yet little known relationship, between hacendados and their peónes, and how the attempt to distinguish between both groups might have in fact united them even more.

Description

Charro suits are perhaps the most recognizable way of dressing associated with Mexican culture, even though this way of dressing is not widely used within Mexico, and which consists of several garments, is most easily recognized by its use of wide hats, or sombreros, which can be seen used by mariachi groups even in the United States. There are five variations to the suit each of which evolved from the particular situation in which each is used, and all of which vary in their amount of intricacy, work to produce them, materials and price. The way the suit looks, and how it is worn, is regulated by the Federación Nacional de Charros, a group based in Mexico City, who serves as the authority on all things charro. These are the variations:

Faena - The simplest of the variations to the suit is the one used during a charreada, or competition. It is a more functional suit, for it tends to lack anything that is unnecessary, such as metal adornments or very elaborate designs, to competing.

Media Gala - More adorned and of better quality than the faena variation, but also used in competitions, this variation has more designs, a vest and a jacket with leather buttons.

Gala - Variation used on horseback but not in competitions usually made in grey, dark blue or black.

Gran gala - Similar to gala but made with higher quality materials such as silk and silver this variation uses girdle, matching in color the tie, around the waist.

Etiqueta - Used at night or during ceremonies, this variation is used in black and on foot; although it can be used on horseback during weddings and funerals.

Users

Charro suits are used by men, known as charros, who perform at equestrian competitions known as charreadas, an equivalent to the American rodeo. The official dictionary for the Spanish language gives charro the definition of, "…(1627) rider who wears a special suit, conformed of jacket with embroidery, adjusted trousers, white shirt and wide brim hat, and conic crown" (Real Academia Española 137). The word charro itself comes from the Basque word txar, meaning weak or defective, and it is the name given to villagers of Salamanca, Spain (Rincon Gallardo 2). Coarse, rustic or bad are also possible translations to txar and why charros are called as such is not completely clear, but it is possible that what originally could have served as an insult became the name adopted by this group. Charros represent traditional, rural, catholic and aristocratic values (Nájera Ramírez 8) and seek to preserve them through tradition. Within Mexico the figure of the charro, originally a symbol of class and gender stratification of haciendas, became popularized during the mid-1900s by singers/actors such as, Jorge Negrete, Pedro Infante and Arturo Guízar.

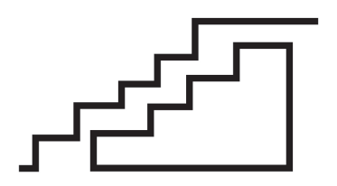
Place of Usage

Art losses is efficacy if it is not seen by the public, thus, in addition to understanding what it is, how it came to be and who uses it, it is important to know where it is displayed, why is it displayed here and who is meant to view it. The charro suit before the mid-nineteen century was seldom seen outside the haciendas, and was mostly seen by hacendados and peónes. During this period, and especially after the French Intervention, the charro suit began to attract attention outside the hacienda environment and, in an interesting change of status, charros were propelled into the national setting as sportsmen in competitions known as charreadas: competitions which replaced bull fights as the sport of the upper classes.

Grecas

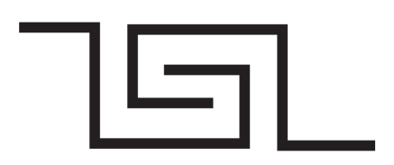
Grecas

The most intricate aspect of the charro suit is a series of patterns known as grecas which adorn large sections of the attire, and tend to be consistent in most charro suits and even in saddles. Grecas, despite being used extensively, and despite the fact that they give the suit one of its most distinguishable aspects, seemed to be little understood by many of the charros who use them. Pre-colonial designs



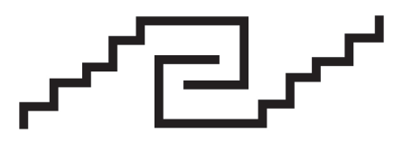
Spiral

Perhaps the most iconic of all the patterns, this spiral represents the God Quetzalcóatl who traditionally is depicted as a snake. In shields known as quetzalxicalcoliuhquichimalli, on codices and in ritual capes worn by priests the spiral can be seen (Longhena 93). T



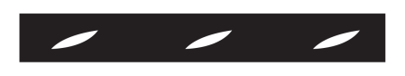
Combined

Here we can see combination of the step and spiral motifs into more complicated patterns. This is the norm when designing greca for many motifs and patterns are combined to Form the designs



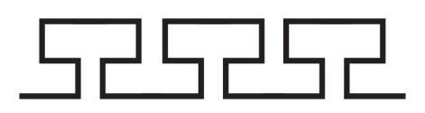
Blade

The negative space in this design is reminiscent of the obsidian blades used by natives before the Spanish arrival. They were used in war, daily life and to perform ritual sacrifices. This design is not seen a whole lot in charro suits.



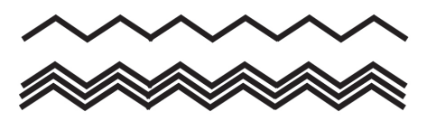
Homes?

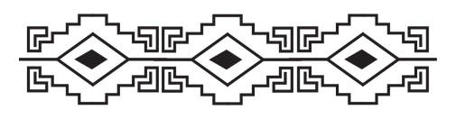
It seems that this pattern is a repetition of the glyph for house. Known as Kal (kal [li]) (Solis 297), this symbol also represented hospitality and can be found in codices and architecture.



Striped Designs

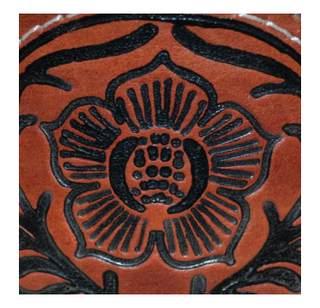
Found in woman's skits, known as hupiles, patterns such as this are commonly found in the charro suit. Pottery from the proto classic period (300BC – AD300) from the state of Nayarit can be seen displaying this motif, and to the Mayans it was a representation of snakes, and it is possible that this symbol also represents mountains or water.





Flower

This design can usually be found in the decorations of hats, but also in church windows. The Roselle flower, or one of the hibiscus flowers, is the most likely candidate as the flower represented here. Brought originally from Africa around the 1600's, in Mexico this flower is used to make a beverage known agua de Jamaica and similar flowers can also be found in Mexico.

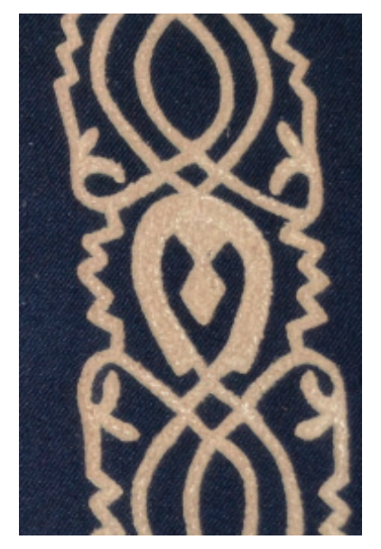


Golden Eagle

The eagle represents the Aquila Chrysaetos, or golden eagle. Eagles represented the Aztec culture and it was believed that an eagle eating a snake, snake representing the Mayan God Quetzalcóatl, served as the marker for the location were Tenochtitlán (now Mexico City) was to be founded.

Corn

Corn is a crop native to Mesoamerica whose cultivation stated around 3500 BC (Diamond 142), served as the chief crop in Mexico when the Spanish arrived and continues to be a key element in Mexican food, particularly in tortillas.



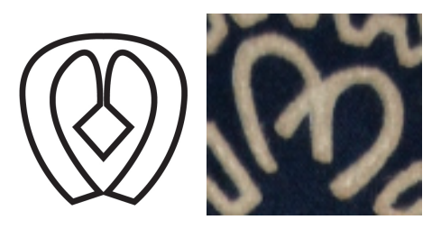
Plants

Some of the plants found in greca are very similar to those found in codices decorations. See image. This stylistic approach could have influenced the stylization of plant life into the charro suit.

Colonial Designs

Rococo and Arabic Designs

At the time of the creation of the charro suit the influence of Rococo art's intricate patterns affected dressing. Arabic calligraphy and art could also have been a factor influencing the charro suit, for Spain had been for centuries under Muslim rule.

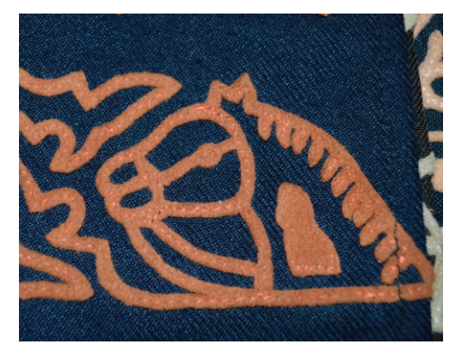


Cross

Needles to say the cross was one of the most important, if not the most, of the symbols the Spanish could have incorporated. The cross represented the authority of the Church, thus of God, and that of the king whom god granted the crown.

Horse and Horseshoes

They are constantly seen in greca which makes sense, since the horse is as vital to the charro as the suit itself. Horses aided the conquest of Mexico and served as symbols of power and status during the colony, and even to this day owning and riding horses is seen as a symbol of status and chivalry.



Wheat

Wheat was brought to the new world trough Europe and quickly became a dominant crop for it was favored by the Spanish over corn, a native crop. "Wheat replaced corn as agriculture shifted from Indian to Spanish control" (Russell 81) and because natives served as workers they were mainly responsible for its production.

Development

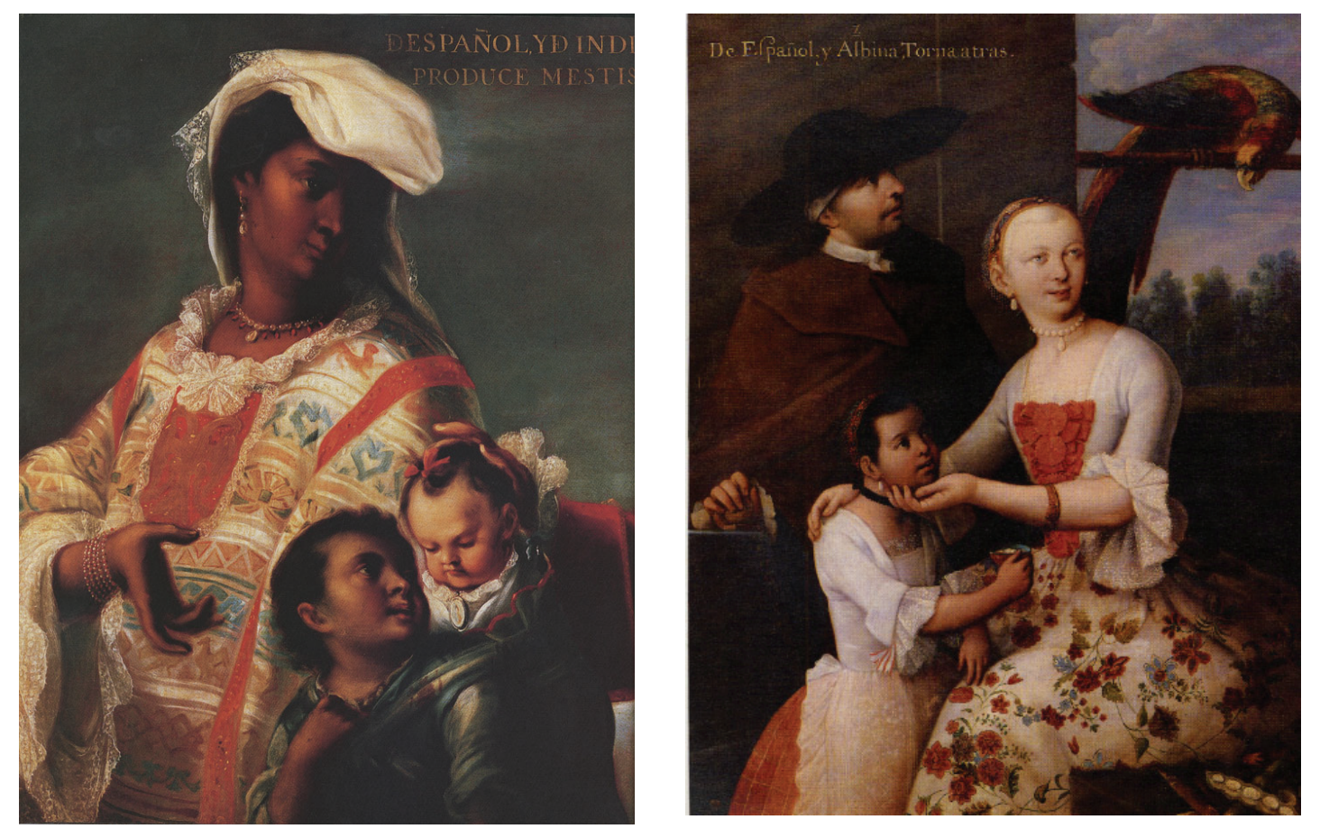
Haciendas and Horses

The origins of the society that led to the creation of the charro attire go back as far as the Spanish conquest of Mexico and the creation of Spain's new world colony, la Nueva España (The New Spain). In 1521 after the fall of Tenochtitlan the Spanish conquistadores, aided by their native allies, began to conquer the territories surrounding the Aztec Empire and the Empire itself. As the colony expanded so did the need to administer the tributes coming from the newly conquered lands, for which Hernán Cortés, and latter the viceroy, gave grants, known as encomiendas which permitted the Spanish to collect tribute from natives living in a certain area (Russell 31).

This changed in the mid-1600s when some encomiendas, and other grazing permits given by the crown, became fixed areas with fixed boundaries under the legal ownership of an individual. These areas, were known as haciendas

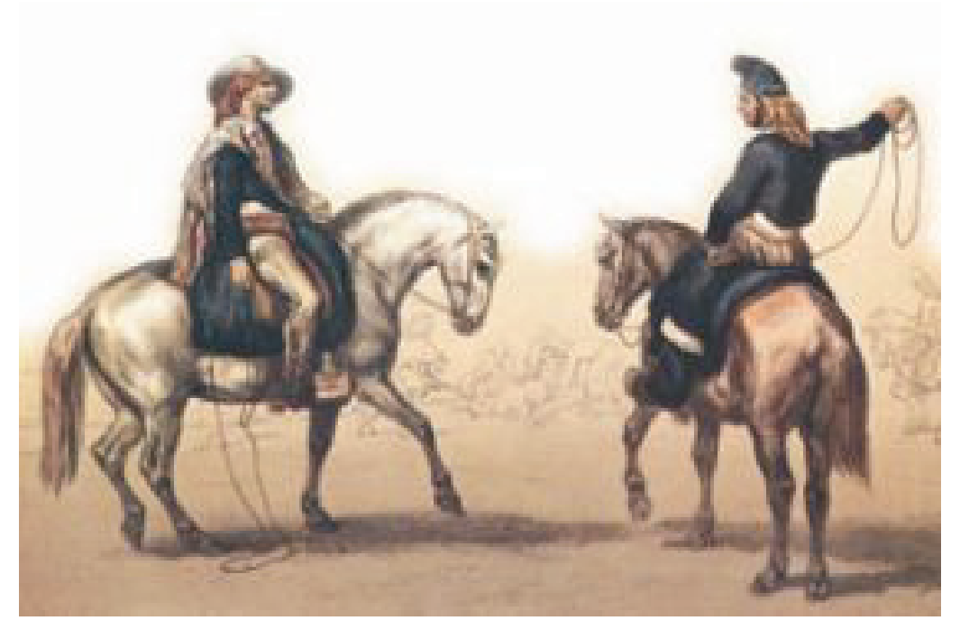
Changing Society

Castes, a concept already known to both the Spanish and the natives, proved to be the solution to a diverse colony. They created approximately 16 principal castes that could combine with each other to produce more castes (Diego Fernández 249)

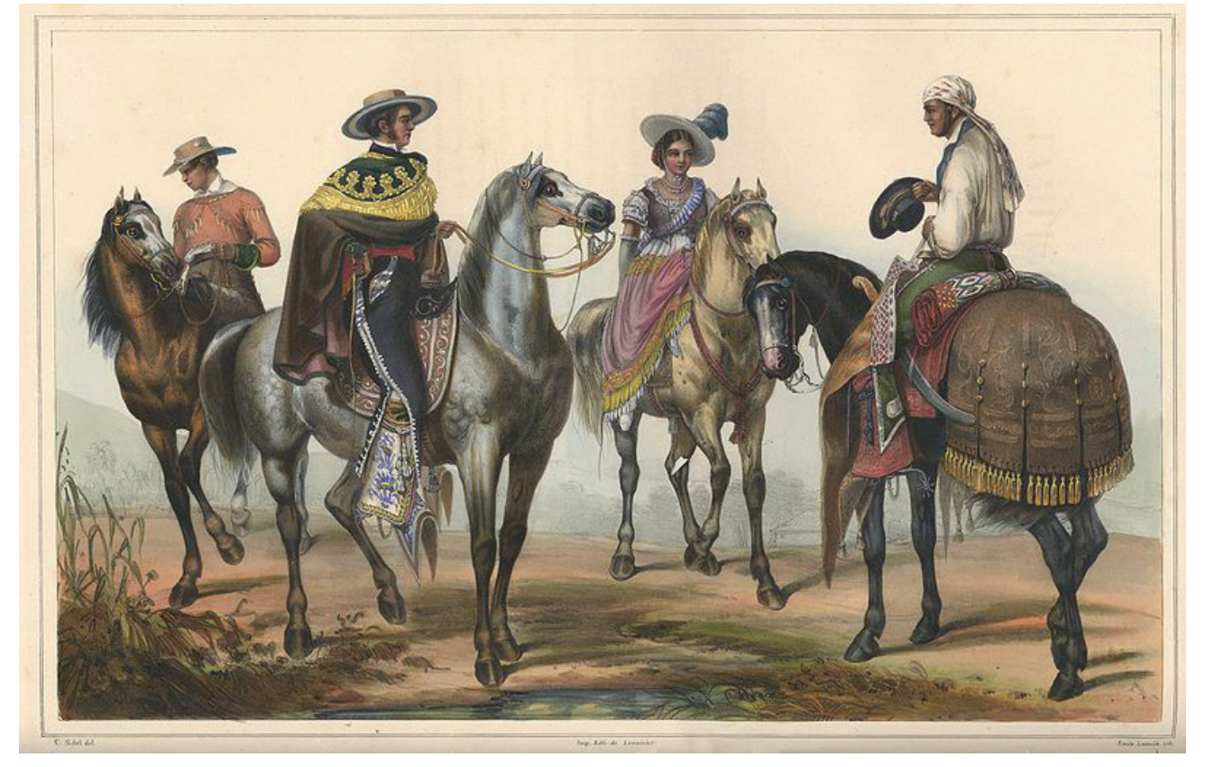


Clothing used to visually place a person within a caste, or group, was a practice already present before the Spanish arrival and knowing who belonged to which caste was critical to keep the colony functioning properly.

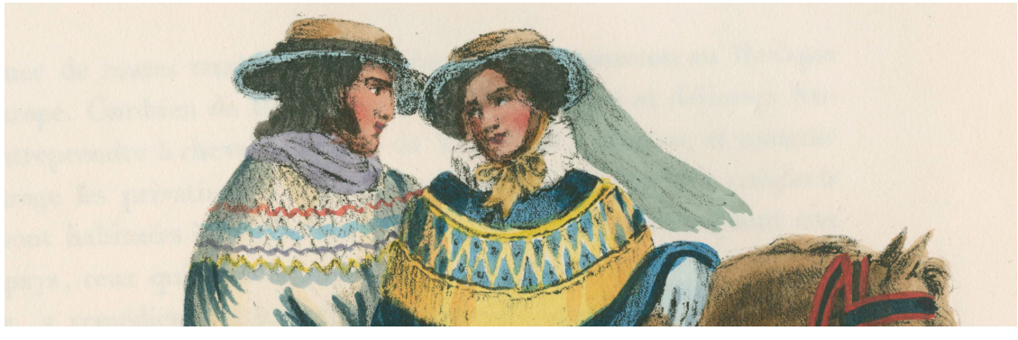
Having such a varied number of groups meant that the groups were not always clear, and a dissolution of clear differences mean that people could move between castes, thus moving within the society itself. Increased wealth propelled this social mobility and helped change castes from being racial factors, but rather into an economic ones.



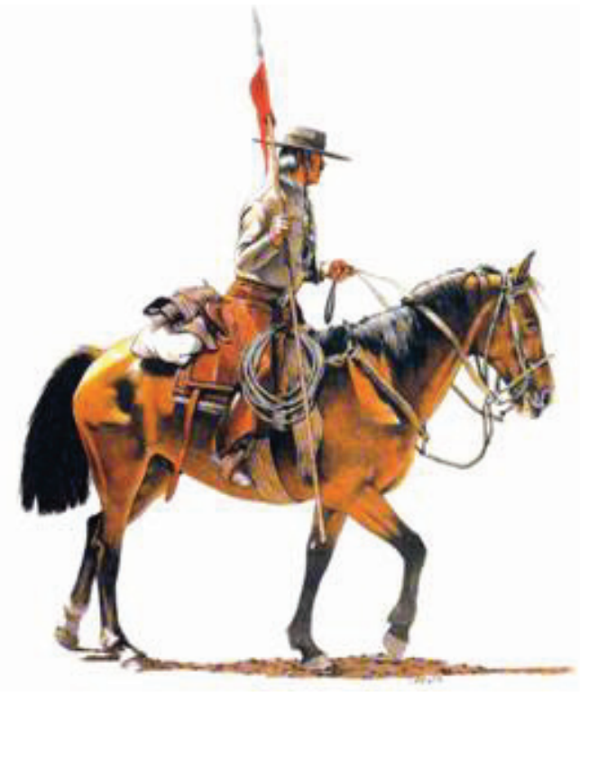
Clothing was no longer effective to distinguish the castes and this diminished the power of the castes that controlled the colony. The changes were more noticeable in the cities but although the medieval-like organization of the haciendas helped maintain the distinctions between its members stronger than in the cities, the increased social mobility also began to affect them. Workers dressed like the Spanish did, which added to the use of horses, began to "equalize" hacendados and peónes, at least visually.



Baroque influence of the period increased the detail, intricacy and use of gold and silver inlays in women's clothing, and this began to transfer to the men's vestment as well.

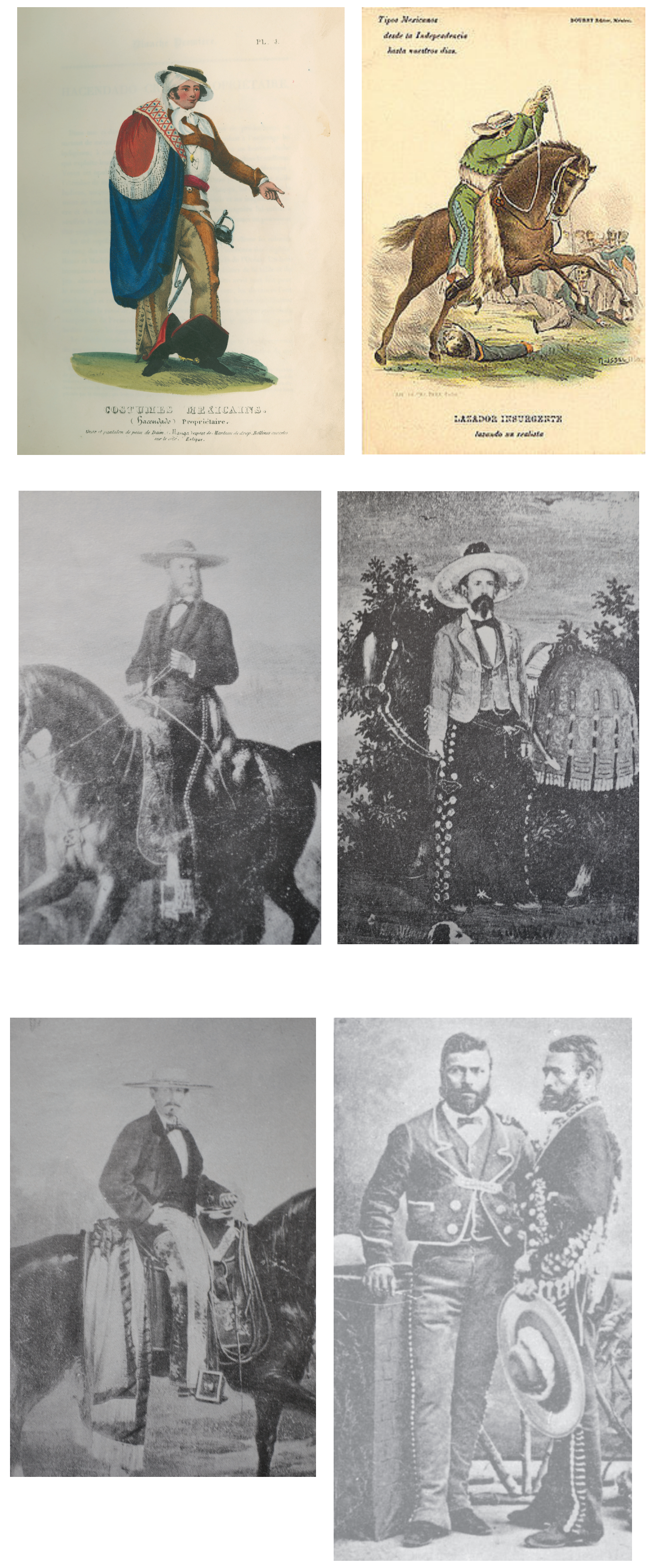


In 1862, the French under Napoleon III invaded Mexico and, aided by thousands of Mexican fighters who had been defeated by the government of President Benito Juarez during the War of Reforma, created an empire trough 1867, at which head was placed the archduke of Austria, Emperor Maximilian of Hapsburg. Two groups of horsemen participated in this conflict, on the side of the new emperor many hacendados (by then known as charros) joined the war effort, and, opposing the Emperor, a group of fighters known as chinancos joined the deposed President Juarez in an effort to expel the French from Mexico. Chinancos dressed similarly as the hacendado charros, albeit not as extravagantly, and came from less affluent backgrounds.



It is widely believed that Maximilian changed the cut of the pants from a lose one to an English one; much tighter fitting but broad on the base, and ideal for horse riding.

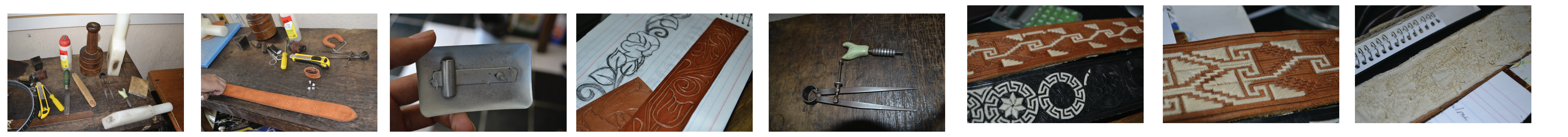
The charros began adopting the Emperor's modifications and continue to use them till today. Thus the hacendado charros influenced the chinancos, who influenced the Emperor, and who in turn, influenced the charros.

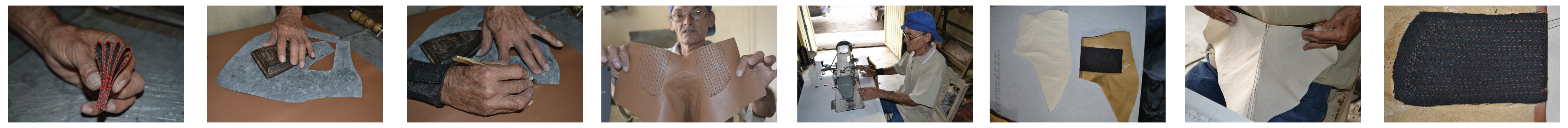


Production

Belts

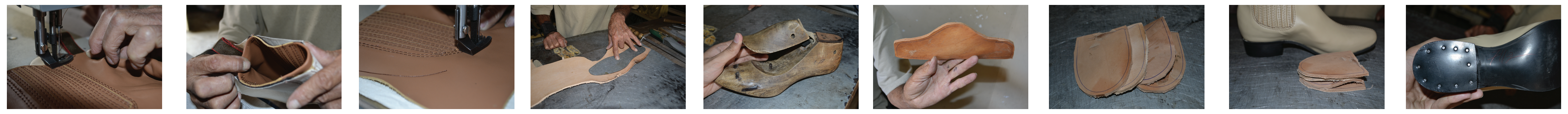
Manufacturing a belt is perhaps the most difficult and time consuming of all the different sections of the charro suit. A process that can take months, it involves an impressive amount of work most of which goes to the greca. The tools as seen in figure xx are still very traditional, with the exception of the electric sewing machines which can cost up to 12,000 pesos (1200 USD). And, although recent economic problems have reduced the demand for this type of belt, simpler designs without the greca continue to be produced in large numbers.





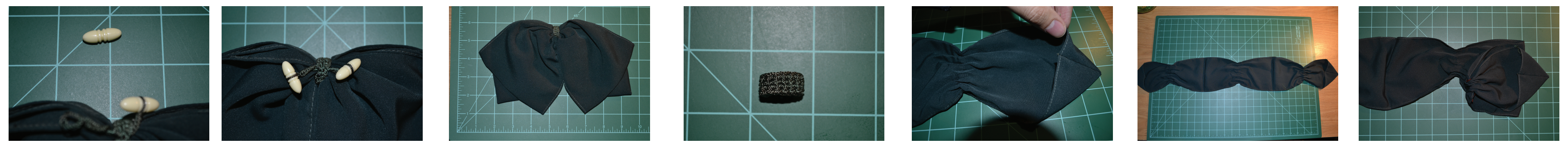
Boots

Although making boots is a much faster process than producing a belt, taking only a few days to complete, it too requires several steps which can take years to master; these are those steps:

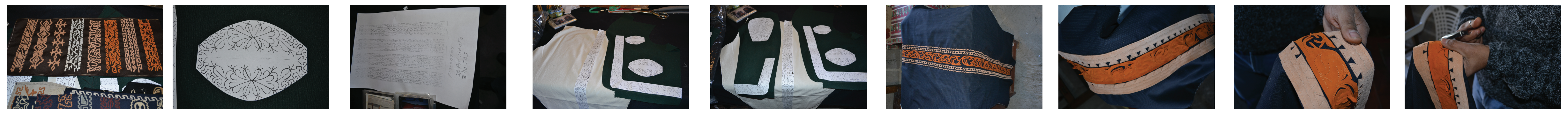


Moños

Ties tend to be bought rather than be custom made and producing them is a relatively easy process if we compare it with the rest of the suit. They consist of four pieces; a cloth strip, a woven string ring, and two huesitos to attach it to the shirt.



Suit (trousers, vest and jacket)

The same process applies to creating a vest jacket or trousers; all together they can take one to two weeks to manufacture.